

R. Howard Bloch. *The Anonymous Marie de France*.
University of Chicago Press, 2003. pp. 368.

In his most recent book, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, R. Howard Bloch elegantly illuminates not only the work of this mysterious author but also the twelfth-century sociolinguistic milieu that informs the three texts that have been definitively attributed to her, the *Fables*, the *Lais*, and *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*. Bloch opens his introduction with an emphasis on the “unknowability” of Marie, this enigmatic writer who, by stating her name, simultaneously provides us with so much—and yet so little; this fact, rather than restricting our understanding of the possibilities of her work, rather broadens the scope of our interpretations. Bloch speculates that Marie’s writing is at once a symptom of social change and a presentation of a new morality based on the responsibility inherent in the free will of the individual, and thus attributes to Marie “the birth of literature”

(23), which is moreover a feminine literature in the way it “negotiates between individual and community” (24).

Launching the body of his book (Chapter One, “The Word *Aventure* and the Adventure of Words”) with Marie’s obsession with beginnings in the Prologue of her *Lais* in an adroit maneuver that smoothly introduces the framing network of *aventures* that support the narratives, Bloch reminds the reader of the fluid nature of the word *aventure* and underscores the complexity of Marie’s deceptively simple *Lais*. Indeed, the “etymological murkiness” (30) of the *lai* itself stands as a contradiction, a sign of complicated symbols in a written rendering of what was most likely an aural performance. Because of Marie’s anxiety about origins and (mis)interpretation of truths, memory and remembering in the *Lais* become the moral duty of the writer, a process of the

resemblance of dispersed or fragmented material in danger of being forgotten by future generations. Thus the theme of Bloch's second chapter, "If Words Could Kill: The *Lais* and Fatal Speech," is an extension of these anxieties at play in the Prologue, of Marie's fascination with the possibilities of language and its intrinsic multiplicity: he concludes that the *Lais* "are in some deep sense about language as a flawed, uncontrollable and sometimes fatal medium" (79). Indeed, writing itself can be seen as a betrayal of voice, an idea that Bloch explores in Chapter Three ("The Voice in the Tomb of the *Lais*") as he details Marie's emphasis on the ways in which orality is drawn into writing, an entombment of the living voice in the written word, where she exhibits a marked contrast between the moral responsibility to speak that she discusses in the Prologue and the danger of speaking that is demonstrated in the *lais*.

In Chapter Four ("Beastly Talk: The *Fables*"), Bloch observes that the *Fables* appear to double the *Lais*, since the

major themes of obsession with beginnings and memory, and with language as difficult and flawed, are echoed in the *Fables*, as well as the issues surrounding translation or rewriting of material and its inherent potential for self-transformation. The subject of the suspiciousness of speech acts is carried over into Chapter Five ("Changing Places: The *Fables* and Social Mobility at the Court of Henry II"), where Bloch points to the prevalence of animal imagery in 12th-century writing, of the descriptions of the "bestial struggle" (154) of court politics and the linkage of envy with animal appetite, as a dominant theme of the *Fables* that underscores the growing importance of the urban court in Anglo-Norman society and the anxiety that resulted from the radically changing social conditions and the emergence of a professional administrative class during the development of the royal bureaucracy. These changes brought about new ways of achieving social success based on merit and personal worth, especially through education; Bloch continues this line of reasoning in Chapter Six

("Marie's *Fables* and the Rise of the Monarchic State") when he examines the importance of the individual in the *Fables*, especially the efficacy of free will in determining the course of an individual when reason, through intellect and will, can overcome animal instincts. He emphasizes the potential of ethical choice in the *Fables*, and argues that this factor coupled with the urbanization and organization of the Anglo-Norman monarchy, especially in the area of legal reform, calls into question the feudal traditions of wealth, family, and recourse to force to resolve conflicts.

Bloch's exploration of the *Espurgatoire Saint Patriz* in Chapter Seven ("A Medieval 'Best Seller'") situates the poem in the emerging medieval tradition of Purgatory and courtly literature, noting in particular its resemblance to the *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes as "a 'purgatorial sojourn' in the mode of a Grail romance" (217). He pulls some of the most significant thematic threads of the previous two texts together with those of the *Espurgatoire* in order, in

Chapter Eight ("Between Fable and Romance"), to position the poem both between Marie's two earlier works and between two cultures (clerical and lay) in what he considers to be Marie's attempt "to resolve that which remains incomplete, troubling, and untenable in her other two works" (242). In his final chapter ("The Anglo-Norman Conquest of Ireland and the Colonization of the Afterlife"), Bloch looks at the *Espurgatoire* through a postcolonial lens as part of the "civilizing mission of the English" (270) with Henry II's conquest of Ireland, especially considering the poem's "ideological sustenance of the administrative institutions of the Angevin monarchy" (286). Bloch's ultimate conclusion, that the complexity of Marie's work is ultimately observable in its resonance through the centuries and the variety of ways we can "read" the unknowable Marie and her writing, "whose 'surplus of sense' is, finally, inexhaustible" (320), will most likely meet with little protest by those who have journeyed with him through Marie's captivating texts.

Bloch's compelling arguments about the corpus of Marie de France's work as we know it today are, like Marie's writing itself, broad in scope and potential for further investigation. By studying the three texts together, he is able to trace the major themes that echo through each poem and even Anglo-Norman society at large, situating her works in the varied milieux that inform them and are informed by them. His diverse approaches to the literature, ranging from philology to New Historicism to postcolonial studies, virtually guarantee that readers both expert and novice coming to Marie's writing will find something of value to enlighten their understanding of this intriguing writer and the radically changing world she inhabited.

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"[W]hy do you respect
your feminine sex? Put on
manly courage and mount
the horse like a man."

□ Christina of Markyate,
speaking to herself in her